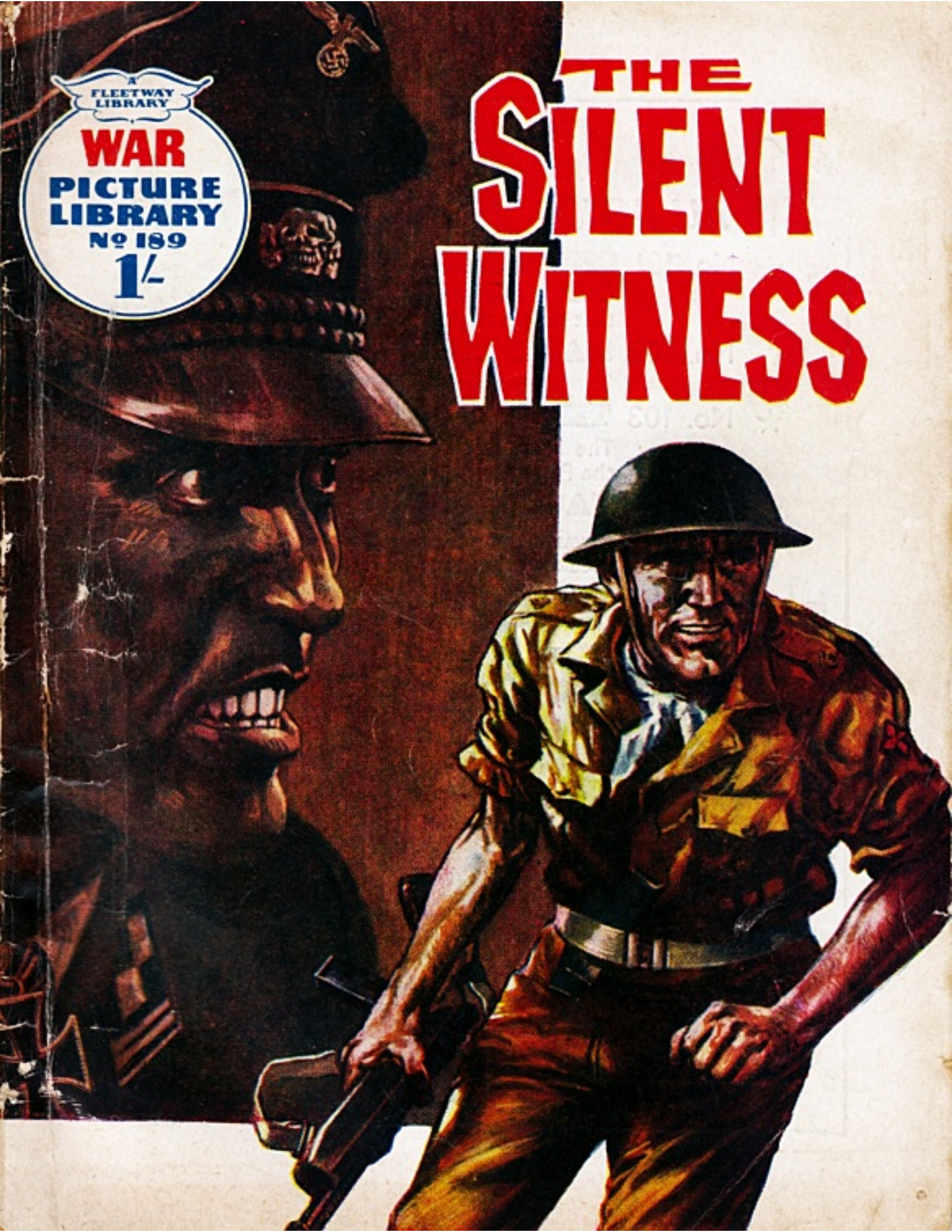




THE SILENT WITNESS



4

ALL-ACTION ISSUES EVERY MONTH★ No. 101 **CHECKPOINT**

Courage their ally, tyranny the foe—they fought that others might be free.

★ No. 102 **HARD TO KILL**

They called him the Iron Sergeant . . .

★ No. 103 **THE ACID TEST**

The little Honey tanks challenged the might of the Panzers.

★ No. 104 **FACE THE ENEMY**

It was the sort of desperate mission that makes or breaks a man, even a commando.

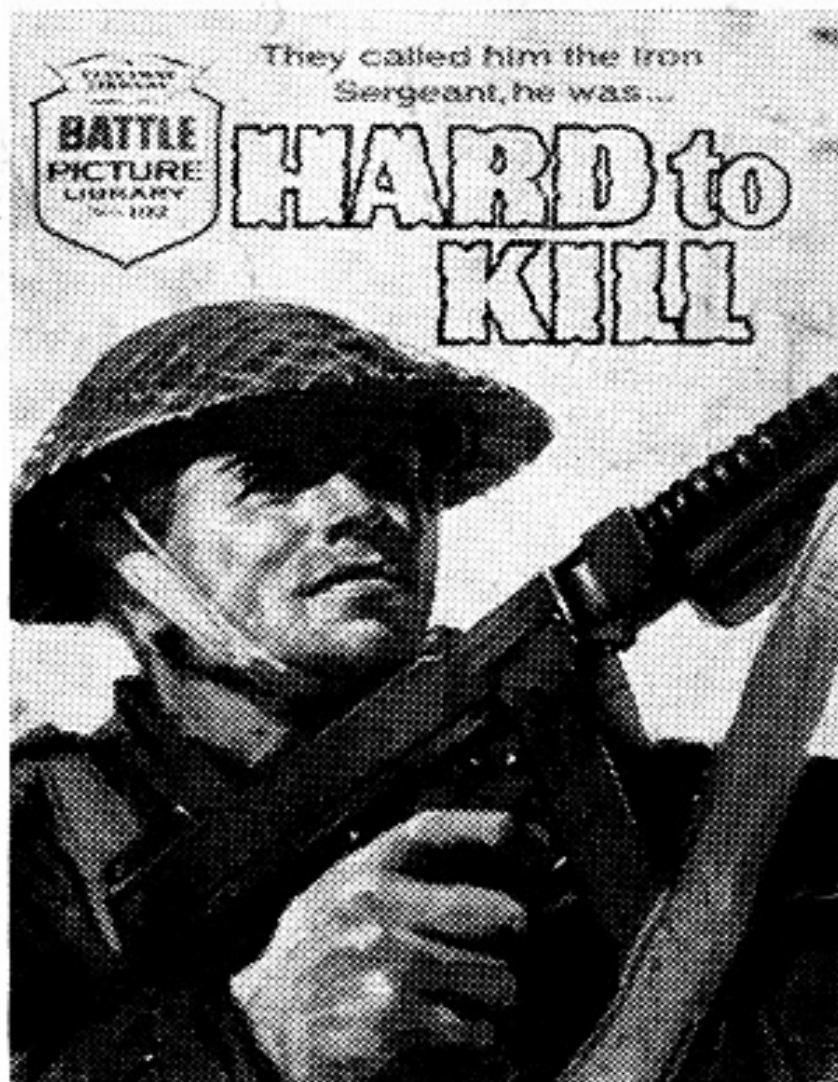
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THE SILENT WITNESS

PULVERISING! IT WAS A WORD TO DESCRIBE THE MORTAR BOMBARDMENT THAT BLANKETED THE GROUND HELD BY SEVEN PLATOON ON AN APRIL DAY IN ITALY, 1944 . . .



SEVEN PLATOON, "A" COMPANY IN THE FIRST BATTALION OF A COUNTY REGIMENT WITH A LONG AND PROUD TRADITION.

Chapter 1. *Out on a Limb*

SECOND LIEUTENANT RON SHEPHERD WAS PLATOON-COMMANDER . . . AND NEW TO IT ALL, FRESH FROM AN OFFICER CADET TRAINING UNIT IN ENGLAND.



HIS FIRST DAY
WITH US AND A BAPTISM
OF FIRE AS BAD AS ANY
LARRUPING I CAN REMEMBER
IN MY FOUR YEARS AS A
SOLDIER.



THE GERMAN ARTILLERYMEN
HAVE ZEROED-IN ON US,
SERGEANT CLANDON!
WE'VE GOT TO DO
SOMETHING BEFORE
THIS GUNFIRE WIPES
US ALL OUT!

HE CAN'T EVEN TELL
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
SHELLING AND MORTARING.
IN A PLATOON OF
VETERANS, HE STICKS
OUT LIKE A SORE
THUMB.

WHERE'S THE CHAP WITH
THE WALKIE-TALKIE, SERGEANT?
I WANT HIM TO SEND BACK A
MESSAGE ASKING IF WE CAN
HAVE IMMEDIATE COUNTER-
BATTERY SUPPORT!



SERGEANT CLANDON LOOKED AROUND TO THE SIGNALLER'S
FOXHOLE NEARBY AND GRIMACED . . .



THERE'S THE
LAD YOU'RE LOOKING
FOR, SIR. HE'S HAD IT,
POOR BLOKE . . . AND SO
HAS THE WALKIE-TALKIE.
WE'RE OUT ON A
LIMB!

The Silent Witness

THE YOUNG SUBALTERN WAS IN A QUANDARY. SHOULD HE DETAIL A RUNNER TO HIS COMPANY COMMANDER RIGHT AWAY OR WAIT TILL THE BARRAGE ENDED AND THEN SEND HIM THROUGH ? UNCERTAINLY, HE MADE HIS DECISION ...



FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, THE DELUGE OF MORTAR-BOMBS SUDDENLY CEASED AND, AT THE SAME TIME, MENACING FIGURES TOOK SHAPE IN THE SWIRLING SMOKE ...



RON SHEPHERD REACTED IN THE MANNER OF A MUSKETRY INSTRUCTOR GIVING A DIRECTIVE TO A SQUAD OF ROOKIES AT A TRAINING-CENTRE.



THERE WAS INSTANTANEOUS RESPONSE FROM A PLATOON REDUCED TO TWO-THIRDS OF ITS STRENGTH. BRENS AND STENS HAMMERED FIERCELY. LEE-ENFIELDS THUMPED IN HEAVY UNDERTONE.



The Silent Witness

GERMAN INFANTRYMEN JERKED SPASMODICALLY IN THE THRASH OF THAT BULLET-HAIL. THEY SPUN, THEY BUCKLED... AND DIED...



BUT STILL THE GERMANS PUSHED FORWARD, PENETRATING TO THE HEART OF THE DEFENSIVE-AREA WHERE THE BRITISH WERE DUG-IN.

LAST MAN, LAST ROUND... HOW OFTEN HAVE I HEARD THAT IN ARMY LECTURE-ROOMS? AND NOW THIS IS THE REAL THING!



SEVEN PLATOON TOOK FURTHER PUNISHMENT IT COULD ILL-AFFORD. YET THE REMNANT FOUGHT BACK WITH A FEROCITY THAT SMASHED THE MORALE OF THE ENEMY'S LINE.

WE'VE LICKED 'EM, MEN! WE'VE LICKED 'EM!



SERGEANT CLANDON DID NOT SHARE RON'S HIGH SPIRITS.

DON'T SPEAK TOO SOON, SIR. IF I KNOW JERRY, HE'LL BE BACK TO HAVE ANOTHER BITE AT US.



SECOND LIEUTENANT SHEPHERD'S "BAPTISM" IN COMBAT HAD BEEN A STERN ONE. HE PRIDED HIMSELF HE HAD STOOD UP TO IT WELL...

WELL, IF THEY DO, SERGEANT, THEY'LL GET THE SAME TREATMENT ALL OVER AGAIN!



BUT HIS HIGH SPIRITS TOOK A DIVE WHEN HE MADE A QUICK CHECK OF HIS MEN AND DISCOVERED THE EXTENT OF THE PLATOON'S LOSSES. HE MADE HIS WAY TO CLANDON'S SLIT TRENCH.

YOU, TOO, SERGEANT? DO YOU KNOW, APART FROM MYSELF, THERE ISN'T A MAN WHO HASN'T BEEN WOUNDED? ONLY ABOUT A DOZEN ARE IN ANY SHAPE TO FIGHT. THE REST ARE EITHER DEAD, OR STRETCHER CASES.



THEN, FROM THE SLIT, THEY DETECTED MOVEMENTS IN THE NAZIS' LINES.

AS FAR AS I CAN SEE, THEY'RE SPREADING OUT AND WORKING ROUND THE FLANKS.

TO ENCIRCLE US, EH? AND THERE'S PRECIOUS LITTLE WE CAN DO ABOUT IT.

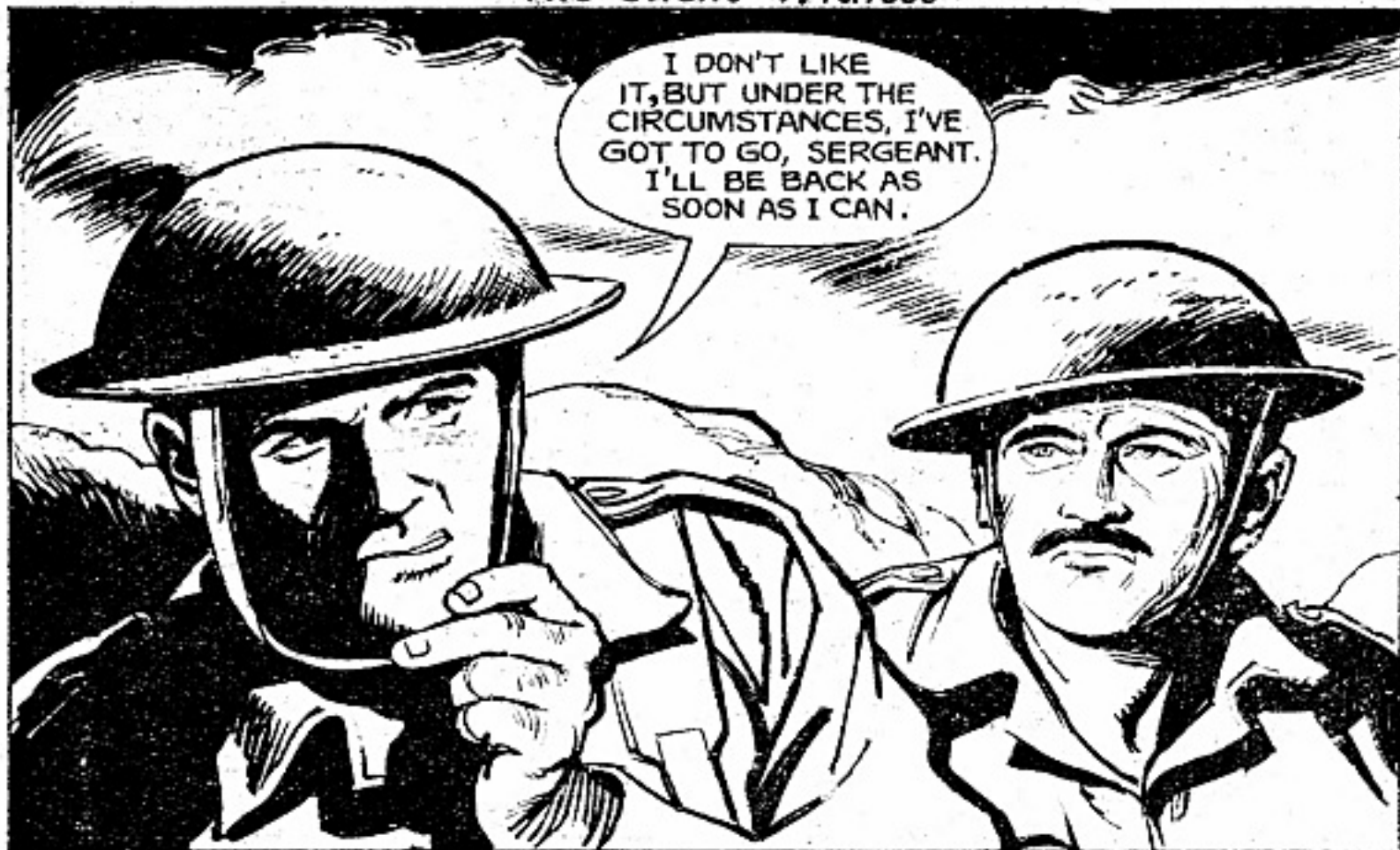


THE SITUATION WAS NOW MORE DESPERATE THAN EVER.

SERGEANT, I'VE GOT TO NOMINATE SOMEONE TO NIP OFF AND REPORT TO THE COMPANY COMMANDER. WE MUST HAVE HELP—AND SOON!

THERE'S ONLY ONE MAN FIT ENOUGH TO RUN TO H.Q., SIR... AND THAT'S YOU!





AFTER INSTRUCTING SERGEANT CLANDON TO TAKE CHARGE, RON SCRAMBLED OUT FROM THE SLIT. PROMPTLY, AN EAGER MARKSMAN WAS BACK IN BUSINESS!



The Silent Witness

RON ACTED ON THAT ADVICE, AND TOOK TO HIS HEELS. THE ENEMY SNIPER "SMOKED" HIM, AND MADE HIS SCALP CRAWL WITH NEAR-MISS SHOTS.

I'LL NEVER DO IT!
HE'LL DRILL A HOLE
CLEAN THROUGH ME
BEFORE EVER I GET
INTO COVER.



BY THE TIME HE HAD REACHED THE QUARRY HE FELT AS IF HE HAD LEAD-FOOTED HIS WAY THROUGH A MARATHON. IN ONE FINAL EFFORT HE THREW HIMSELF INTO ITS SHELTER. BUT HE WAS A SPLIT-SECOND TOO LATE.

AAAGH!



HE FELL HEADLONG INTO THE QUARRY, AND LANDED WITH A THUD ON ITS CHALKY FLOOR. . .




HE GAVE HIMSELF FIRST-AID WITH DIFFICULTY. . . AND IT WAS SEVERAL MINUTES BEFORE HE FOUND THE STRENGTH TO STRUGGLE TO HIS FEET.



BUT HE COULD NOT GUESS THAT VERY SOON HE WAS TO WISH A BULLET HAD LAID HIM DEAD IN THAT ACCURSED QUARRY!

RON LEFT THE QUARRY AND BEGAN TO WORK BACK TOWARDS THE ROUTE BY WHICH HE HOPED HE WOULD RE-ESTABLISH CONTACT WITH HIS COMPANY COMMANDER.

NO CHANCE OF BEING SHOT AT HERE, ANYHOW. NOT A JERRY IN SIGHT.



BUT HE HAD BARELY COVERED HALF-A-DOZEN YARDS WHEN, FROM BEHIND A CLUMP OF TALL GRASS, A PATROL OF GERMANS ROSE MENACINGLY ALL ABOUT HIM.

HALTEN, ENGLANDER!
RAISE YOUR HANDS AND
WALK SLOWLY TOWARDS ME!



THE BRITISH OFFICER HAD NO OPTION BUT TO OBEY. A FELDWEBEL, WHO SPOKE ENGLISH FLUENTLY, ADDRESSED HIM . . .

OBERLEUTNANT KOHLEN WISHES TO INTERROGATE YOU .

OBERLEUTNANT KOHLEN NEEDN'T BOTHER UNLESS HE SIMPLY WANTS TO KNOW MY NAME, RANK AND NUMBER. YOU CAN REMIND HIM THAT'S ALL I'M OBLIGED TO TELL HIM .



WHEN RON'S WORDS WERE TRANSLATED, THEY BROUGHT A RUSH OF PURPLE TO THE OBERLEUTNANT'S FACE. ERNST KOHLEN WAS A QUICK-TEMPERED, BRUTAL MAN .



PIG OF AN ENGLANDER !

RON FELL, HALF-STUNNED. FOR A MOMENT, KOHLEN GLARED AT HIM. THEN, ALL AT ONCE, HIS EXPRESSION CHANGED TO ONE THAT WAS A BLEND OF VICIOUSNESS AND CUNNING.



THE FELDWEBEL HAVING CARRIED OUT HIS INSTRUCTIONS, KOHLEN MOTIONED IN THE DIRECTION OF THE QUARRY.

THERE'S WHERE THE ENGLISHMAN CAME FROM. RETRACE HIS STEPS UNTIL YOU'RE IN SIGHT OF THOSE BLOCKHEAD FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN OF HIS WHO ARE GIVING US SO MUCH TROUBLE. AFTER THAT, HERE IS WHAT YOU MUST DO...



KOHLER CONTINUED TO SPEAK FOR A MINUTE OR TWO MORE. WHEN HE HAD FINISHED, HE DISMISSED MESNER WITH A CURT WAVE OF HIS HAND.

AT THE DOUBLE, MESNER!
I WANT THIS AFFAIR SETTLED
AS SPEEDILY AS
POSSIBLE!



THE FELDWEBEL BROKE INTO A RUN. HE GAINED THE QUARRY, AND CLAMBERED UP THE FAR SIDE OF IT.

THIS WAY, YOU MEN! IF YOU GET BACK
NOW YOU CAN AVOID BEING
SURROUNDED! IT'S
ALL CLEAR IN THIS
DIRECTION!



THE PITIFUL REMNANT OF SEVEN PLATOON HEARD THOSE REASSURING WORDS, AND SIGHED WITH RELIEF.

IT'S MISTER SHEPHERD.
SEEMS LIKE HE'S SEEN A
WAY TO GET US SAFELY
OUT OF HERE.



AS THE SURVIVORS OF THE PLATOON STUMBLED TOWARDS THE QUARRY...

THERE'S MISTER SHEPHERD
AGAIN, LADS— ON THE SLOPE
OF THAT GULLY. HE'S WAVING
TO US TO FOLLOW HIM.

THEY DESCENDED
THE QUARRY'S FACE
LABORIOUSLY, PAINFULLY.
IN SHUFFLING PROCESSION,
THEY HEADED FOR THE
GULLY.

MAYBE WE SHOULD 'VE STAYED PUT AND TAKEN OUR
CHANCE WHERE WE WERE. IF THE JERRIES COME
AFTER US, THEY'LL CATCH US IN THE OPEN AND
WE WON'T BE ABLE TO PUT UP
MUCH OF A SCRAP.



FELDWEBEL PAUL MESNER WAS STILL BECKONING THAT PROCESSION OF WOUNDED MEN WHEN THE GROUND ALL ABOUT HIM WAS BARBED WITH SPURTS OF FLAME!



WHITE-FACED AND SHAKING, HE STARED IN HORROR AS A SHATTERING VOLLEY SOUNDED THE DEATH-KNELL OF THE BRITISH SOLDIERS HE HAD DECEYED...



HERR OBERLEUTNANT, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? I HAD NO IDEA YOU INTENDED A MASSACRE! I THOUGHT YOU MEANT TO TAKE THEM PRISONER—

YOU THINK TOO MUCH, MESNER! I'VE SAID ALL ALONG YOU'RE TOO SOFT-HEARTED TO BE A GOOD NAZI!

The Silent Witness

THE FELDWEBEL STOOD SPEECHLESS, BUT YOUNG RON SHEPHERD WAS RAGING AS HE TRIED TO FLING HIMSELF AT THE SNEERING NAZI.

YOU
MURDERER!
YOU FILTHY
COLD-BLOODED
MURDERER!

TAKE THE
BRITISH OFFICER
DIRECTLY TO OUR REGIMENTAL
HEADQUARTERS. I'D SHOOT HIM
NOW, BUT THE INTELLIGENCE
SECTION MIGHT WORM SOME
USEFUL INFORMATION
OUT OF HIM.

RON WAS DRAGGED AWAY, BUT A FEW
MOMENTS LATER MESNER OVERTOOK
HIM AND HIS ESCORT . . .

SIR, YOUR HELMET AND TUNIC. I— WISH
YOU TO KNOW THAT OBERLEUTNANT
KOHLEN IS AN EXCEPTION. NO OTHER
OFFICER IN THE FIRST BATTALION OF
THE POTSDAMMER REGIMENT WOULD
HAVE DONE WHAT HE DID . . .

I HAVE SCRIBBLED A NOTE. IT IS IN YOUR
BREAST-POCKET HERE. I AM JUST A
FELDWEBEL . . . ALMOST A 'NOBODY', YOU
MIGHT SAY. YET THE NOTE MAY HELP TO
MAKE THINGS EASIER
FOR YOU . . . IT IS THE
LEAST I CAN DO . . .

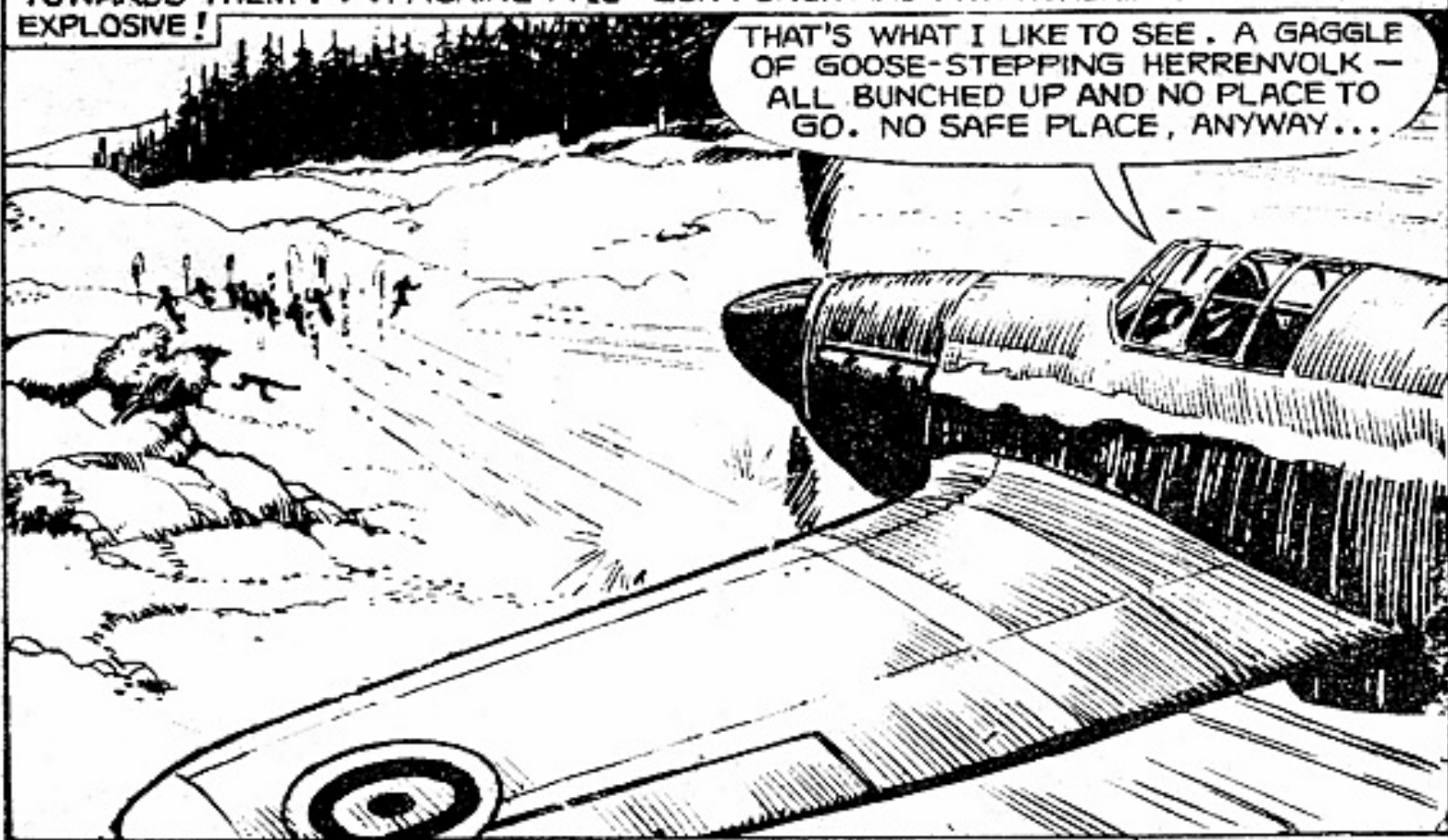
THE GERMAN SERGEANT RETURNED TO WHERE KOHLEN WAS REORGANISING HIS COMBAT-GROUP. PRESENTLY THEY MOVED OFF, BUT THEY WERE NOT DESTINED TO TRAVEL FAR . . .

ACHTUNG!
SPITFEUR!



MESNER WAS WRONG. IT WAS A HURRICANE, NOT A SPIT, THAT WAS SWEEPING TOWARDS THEM . . . PACKING A 12-GUN PUNCH AND FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE!

THAT'S WHAT I LIKE TO SEE. A GAGGLE OF GOOSE-STEPPING HERRENVOLK — ALL BUNCHED UP AND NO PLACE TO GO. NO SAFE PLACE, ANYWAY...



STREAMS OF THREE-O-THREE LASHED INTO THE GERMANS AND THEY TUMBLED LIKE SKITTLES IN A BOWLING-ALLEY...



FROM SOME WAY OFF, RON AND HIS ESCORT LOOKED BACK. THEY SAW THE PLANE COMPLETE ITS RUN, THEN CIRCLE ROUND TO UNLOAD A 250-POUNDER FOR GOOD MEASURE!



THE HURRICANE'S PILOT FAILED TO DISTINGUISH THAT ONE OF THE TRIO AHEAD OF HIM WAS A PRISONER. HIS GUN-PORTS FLARED. RON THREW HIMSELF DOWN . . .



THE AIRCRAFT FLASHED OVERHEAD - MADE A WIDE SWEEP - AND DISAPPEARED. THE BRITISH SUBALTERN PULLED HIMSELF TO HIS FEET . . .



The Silent Witness

THE TWO GERMANS WHO HAD BEEN WITH RON WERE DEAD. HE PICKED UP A MAUSER THAT HAD BELONGED TO ONE OF THEM . . .

I'LL GET HIM FOR
WHAT HE DID TO MY MEN!
I'LL GET HIM— IF IT'S THE
LAST THING I DO!

FOR SEVERAL MINUTES, HE LOST SIGHT OF THE GERMAN AND WHEN HE DID SPOT HIM, THE ENEMY OFFICER WAS A GOOD THREE HUNDRED YARDS DISTANT . . .

HE'S MOVING FASTER
THAN I AM. I WONDER IF
I CAN KNOCK HIM OFF
FROM HERE ?

RON TRIED A SHOT, AND MISSED. A SECOND ATTEMPT WAS DENIED HIM FOR HE DISCOVERED, TO HIS CHAGRIN, THERE HAD ONLY BEEN ONE BULLET LEFT IN THE MAUSER'S MAGAZINE.

HANG IT! HE'S GOT AWAY! OBERLEUTNANT KOHLEN, OF THE FIRST BATTALION OF THE POTSDAMMER REGIMENT, EH? I SHALL REMEMBER HIM!



HE THREW ASIDE THE USELESS MAUSER AND RETURNED TO THE PLACE WHERE HE HAD BEEN CAPTURED . . .

NOT A SPARK OF LIFE AMONG THEM. I'M SORRY THE ONE CALLED MESNER HAD TO DIE. HE SEEMED A PRETTY DECENT CHAP . . .



YES, THE GERMANS WERE ALL LIFELESS. BUT HAD SEVEN PLATOON BEEN ANNIHILATED? WAS IT NOT POSSIBLE ONE OR TWO OF HIS MEN MIGHT STILL BE ALIVE? HE MADE FOR THE GULLY . . .

WHY, IT'S MAJOR LENNOX AND SOME OF THE FELLOWS OF 'A' COMPANY! THEY MUST HAVE HAD ORDERS TO MOVE FORWARD. IF ONLY THOSE ORDERS HAD COME A LITTLE EARLIER . . .



Chapter 2. On the Run

THERE WAS A LOOK OF THANKFULNESS ON RON SHEPHERD'S FACE. IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN THERE, IF HE COULD HAVE OVERHEARD WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE GULLY . . .

SERGEANT CLANDON, ARE YOU SURE OF YOUR FACTS? I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE THAT ANY BRITISH OFFICER —

IT'S THE TRUTH, MAJOR. WE — WE ALL SAW HIM WITH OUR OWN EYES. MAYBE THE HUNS PUT PRESSURE ON HIM, BUT — HE CALLED US AND HE SET US UP FOR THE NAZIS TO SLAUGHTER . . .

CLANDON'S VOICE TAILED OFF. HE HAD BREATHED HIS LAST BY THE TIME THE YOUNG SECOND LIEUTENANT DESCENDED INTO THE HOLLOW . . .

ARE ANY OF THEM ALIVE, MAJOR LENNOX?

NO. BUT YOUR SERGEANT LIVED LONG ENOUGH TO TELL ME AS UGLY A STORY AS I'VE EVER HEARD. HOW COULD YOU DO IT, SHEPHERD? HOW COULD YOU LET THEM USE YOU TO DESTROY WHAT WAS LEFT OF YOUR PLATOON?

RON STARED BLANKLY AT LENNOX. IT TOOK HIM A LITTLE WHILE TO GRASP THAT HE WAS BEING ACCUSED OF MURDERING HIS OWN MEN . . .

YOU'VE GOT IT ALL WRONG, MAJOR! I DON'T KNOW JUST WHAT CLANDON TOLD YOU, BUT AFTER I LEFT THE PLATOON —

AH, SO YOU FREELY ACKNOWLEDGE YOU LEFT YOUR PLATOON IN THE FACE OF THE ENEMY! SHEPHERD, THAT IN ITSELF IS A BREACH OF DUTY!



RON TRIED TO EXPLAIN HE HAD SET OUT FOR HELP BECAUSE ALL HIS MEN HAD BEEN CASUALTIES. LENNOX CUT HIM SHORT . . .

THOSE WHO TRUSTED IN YOUR LEADERSHIP ARE ALL DEAD NOW, SO I'VE ONLY YOUR UNSUPPORTED WORD. ANYWAY, I'M NOT THE ONE YOU HAVE TO CONVINCE. THIS WILL BE REFERRED TO THE COMMANDING OFFICER . . .



THAT EVENING, IN A VILLAGE THE MAIN BODY OF THE BATTALION HAD OCCUPIED, RON FACED HIS GRIM-FACED C.O. .

SHEPHERD, I KNEW YOUR FATHER. TO THINK THAT YOU, THE SON OF A HOLDER OF THE VICTORIA CROSS, SHOULD BE STANDING BEFORE ME IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS . . .


SIR, I SET OUT WITH THE SAFETY OF MY MEN FOREMOST IN MY MIND. WHEN I WAS CAUGHT BY THE NAZIS . . .



The Silent Witness


HE PAUSED, FOR AT THAT VERY INSTANT HE RECOLLECTED MESNER'S NOTE. WAS THERE A CHANCE THAT SOMETHING IN THE NOTE WOULD CONFIRM HIS STORY?

THIS MAY
BEAR ME OUT, SIR.
IT WAS WRITTEN BY
A GERMAN SERGEANT.
THE INTELLIGENCE
OFFICER KNOWS
GERMAN...



THE BATTALION'S "I" OFFICER TOOK THE NOTE, AND HE TRANSLATED THE MESSAGE WHICH HAD BEEN SCRIBBLED WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS, BUT...

'TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: THIS
BRITISH OFFICER DESERVES SPECIAL
CONSIDERATION. I RESPECTFULLY SUGGEST
HE SHOULD BE TREATED WITH
GOOD WILL.'



SHEPHERD,
THAT NOTE IS
JUST ABOUT AS
DAMNING AS ANYTHING
COULD BE. IT'S CONCLUSIVE
EVIDENCE OF YOUR GUILT!
I'M PLACING YOU UNDER
CLOSE ARREST!

BEVERLEY, TAKE SHEPHERD TO YOUR QUARTERS AND KEEP HIM THERE. THE ADJUTANT WILL APPOINT ANOTHER SUBALTERN TO RELIEVE YOU TOMORROW MORNING.



OUT IN THE STREET, THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER GRASPED THE SECOND-LIEUTENANT FIRMLY BY THE ARM...

THIS WAY!
MY QUARTERS
ARE FIFTY YARDS
DOWN —



AAAAH!
MY ARM! LET
GO OF MY ARM!
I'VE A BULLET-
HOLE IN IT...

RON SLUMPED, HALF-FAINTING WITH THE SUDDEN PRESSURE APPLIED ON A WOUND FAR FROM SERIOUS BUT NEVERTHELESS PAINFUL.

WHY THE DEVIL
DIDN'T YOU SAY
YOU'D BEEN
WOUNDED?
GREAT SCOTT,
HE'S PASSING
OUT! I'D BETTER
GET THE
MEDICAL
OFFICER...



The Silent Witness

BEVERLEY DASHED OFF IN SEARCH OF THE BATTALION'S M.O. HE HAD STILL TO RETURN WITH THE DOCTOR WHEN RON GATHERED HIS WITS...

I'LL—BE OKAY NOW. WHAT A FILTHY MESS!
I—



SUDDENLY, IT DAWNED ON RON SHEPHERD THAT HE HAD BEEN PRESENTED WITH A HEAVEN-SENT OPPORTUNITY...

NOBODY WILL EVER BELIEVE MY STORY. HOW CAN I CLEAR MYSELF? AS LONG AS I'M UNDER CLOSE ARREST, I CAN'T DO A THING ABOUT IT.



HE HAD NO CUT-AND-DRIED PLAN IN MIND, BUT HE KNEW HE SIMPLY HAD TO STAY OUT OF CUSTODY...

EVENING, SIR.

IF THIS SENTRY ONLY KNEW I'M ON THE RUN — IF HE HAD AN INKLING OF WHAT I'VE BEEN ACCUSED OF, HE'D PROBABLY PUT A BULLET THROUGH ME.



HE STRUCK OFF ACROSS-COUNTRY AND BY DAWN, HE WAS DEEP IN A RANGE OF HILLS. SUDDENLY, HE DROPPED INTO COVER . . .



THAT WAS WHEN AN IDEA OCCURRED TO HIM . . .

IF I COULD
PINPOINT THE FIRST
BATTALION OF THE
POTSDAMMER REGIMENT,
I MIGHT BE ABLE TO LAY MY
HANDS ON KOHLEN. I'D
HAVE TO GET HIM THROUGH
TO THE BRITISH LINES
SOMEHOW— AND
MAKE HIM TALK!



HAD HE BEEN IN A LESS PENT-UP STATE OF MIND, HE WOULD PROBABLY HAVE REGARDED THE IDEA AS FANTASTIC.

I'VE NO MEANS
OF CLEARING
MYSELF EXCEPT
THROUGH THAT
SWINE KOHLEN,
ANYWAY...

BE ON YOUR GUARD,
MEN! OUR INFORMATION
IS THAT THEY WILL PASS
ALONG THE ROAD BELOW
SOON AFTER DAYBREAK.

TO LESSEN THE RISK OF DISCOVERY,
RON STARTED TO CRAWL BACK FROM
HIS VANTAGE POINT. AS HE TURNED,
HE SAW MEN MOVING CAUTIOUSLY
THROUGH THE HILLS...

PARTISANS!
THEY'RE WALKING
SLAP INTO THE
GERMANS'
SIGHTS!

RON DID NOT HESITATE. HE MADE A BEE-LINE FOR THE GUERRILLA-FIGHTERS AND THEY HALTED UNCERTAINLY WHEN THEY SAW HIM . . .

SOLDATO
BRITANNO!

SOLDATO
BRITANNO? IT IS
IMPOSSIBLE!

...LUCKILY, THEIR LEADER SPOKE ENGLISH...

THERE'S A
WHOLE CROWD OF
NAZIS LYING IN
WAIT FOR YOU -
CLOSE ON A
HUNDRED OF
THEM, I'D
SAY.

AHA! FROM
THE FIFTY-THREE
REGGIMENTO, THEY
HAVE A COMPANY
BILLETED IN A
VILLAGE NOT FAR
FROM HERE.

IMMEDIATELY RON WAS ALL ATTENTION . . .

DO YOU KNOW THE LOCATIONS OF OTHER GERMAN UNITS — BESIDES THIS FIFTY-THIRD REGIMENT ?

WE MAKE IT OUR BUSINESS TO KNOW. IN OUR HIDING-PLACE — WE KEEP A MAP WHICH SHOWS WHERE ALL NAZI UNITS ARE ON THIS FRONT.



THAT WAS ENOUGH FOR THE BRITISH SUBALTERN. HE PERSUADED THE PARTISANS TO LET HIM ACCOMPANY THEM . . .

YOU VER' WELCOME TO GO WITH US, AMICO MIO. I AM GIOVANNI TRUCHINO, COMMANDANTE OF THIS BAND. GIANNI GRANDE — BIG JOHNNIE — THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL ME FOR SHORT.



THEY TRACKED ON THROUGH HARD MOUNTAIN-COUNTRY AND CAME AT LAST, TO A NARROW FISSURE THAT GAVE ACCESS TO A SYSTEM OF CAVES . . .

I'M INTERESTED IN ONE PARTICULAR GERMAN UNIT - THE FIRST BATTALION OF THE POTSDAMMER REGIMENT. IS IT MARKED ON THIS MAP OF YOURS?



"BIG JOHNNIE" CONSULTED THE MAP AND A CODE BOOK.

SI - THE POTSDAMMER REGIMENT. IT WAS PULLED OUT OF THE FRONT LINE YESTERDAY. WE HEARD IT WOULD BE BILLETED AROUND ALTAMIGLIA. BUT WHY YOU ASK ESPECIALLY?

A CERTAIN NAZI OFFICER - AN OBERLEUTNANT KOHLEN OF THAT BATTALION MURDERED SOME OF MY MEN IN COLD-BLOOD. LEND ME A GUN, GIANNI - I'M GOING TO GET THAT MAN!



WHEN RON OUTLINED HIS STORY, GIANNI GRANDE EYED THE BRITISH OFFICER WITH A NEW RESPECT.

LIEUTENANT SHEPHERD — YOU ARE A MAN AFTER MY OWN HEART. I GIVE YOU MORE THAN A GUN — I GIVE YOU THE SERVICES OF MYSELF AND MY COMRADES ON THIS MISSION OF YOURS.



THE MOON WAS FULL THAT NIGHT WHEN GIANNI LED THE SMALL PARTY OVERLAND TO THEIR OBJECTIVE.

ONE HOUR TO ALTAMIGLIA — ONE HOUR TO DO WHAT WE HAVE TO DO. ONE HOUR TO COME BACK... ALTOGETHER, THREE HOURS...



THREE HOURS. RON SHEPHERD WAS CERTAIN IT WOULD BE THE LONGEST THREE HOURS HE HAD EVER SPENT!

Chapter 3. *The Snatch*

AFTER TRAVELLING FOR ABOUT A MILE, THE ITALIAN PARTISAN LEADER, WHO WAS LEADING THE COLUMN, CALLED A HALT.

LIEUTENANT — IT IS BEST WE GO AHEAD AND MAKE SURE THE COAST IS CLEAR. WE ARE VERY NEAR TO THE AREA PATROLLED BY THE GERMANS.

OKAY, GIANNI. AFTER YOU...

IT WAS DARKER AMONG THE TREES BUT OCCASIONAL SHAFTS OF MOONLIGHT BROKE THROUGH THE OVERHANGING FOLIAGE. SUDDENLY, RON NOTICED THE GLINT OF POLISHED METAL IN A CLUMP OF BUSHES AHEAD...

WAIT, GIANNI — SOMEONE'S THERE — A HUNDRED YARDS IN FRONT OF US!

The Silent Witness

THE TWO MEN MELTED INTO THE UNDERGROWTH AND CAUTIOUSLY CIRCLED AROUND THE DANGER SPOT. THEY SOON CAME UPON A NAZI OUTPOST.



THE OUTPOST WOULD BE A THREAT IF IT WAS LEFT THERE — ON THEIR LINE OF ADVANCE AND OF RETREAT.

THEY CAT-FOOTED NEARER AFTER A WHISPERED CONSULTATION AND RUSHED THE TIRED AND BORED GERMANS SAVAGELY.



JUST AS GIANNI WAS POLISHING OFF HIS OPPONENT WITH A SIZZLING UPPER CUT, RON NOTICED THAT ANOTHER GERMAN HAD STEPPED INTO THE CLEARING . . .



RON PICKED UP THE RIFLE AND TOOK HASTY AIM. IT BARKED NOISILY IN THE STILL NIGHT AIR AND THE GERMAN SOLDIER FELL TO THE GROUND . . .



The Silent Witness

IT WAS NOT UNTIL GIANNI AND RON HAD RETURNED TO THE WAITING PARTISANS THAT GIANNI RECOVERED FROM THE SHOCK OF HIS EXPERIENCE.

I DO NOT KNOW HOW TO THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR SAVING MY LIFE, LIEUTENANT.

THEN DON'T WASTE YOUR BREATH, EH?



AFTER ANOTHER TWENTY-MINUTES MARCH, GIANNI CALLED ANOTHER HALT. HE DETAILED ONE OF HIS FOLLOWERS TO RECONNOITRE THE VILLAGE. A FULL ANXIOUS HOUR DRAGGED BY BEFORE HE RETURNED.

IS THE NEWS GOOD, MARCO?



FOR A SPELL, GIANNI AND MARCO CASCADED ITALIAN IN THE FORM OF RAPID QUESTION AND ANSWER. PRESENTLY THE BIG FELLOW TURNED TO RON . . .

THE NEWS IS GOOD, LIEUTENANT SHEPHERD. MARCO— HE GO INTO VILLAGE, SPEAK WITH FRIENDS, FIND OUT ALL WE NEED TO KNOW . . .

WHAT ABOUT KOHLEN? DID HE LEARN ANYTHING ABOUT KOHLEN?



SI, LIEUTENANT. MARCO'S FRIENDS SAY AN OBERLEUTNANT ANSWERING DESCRIPTION OF THIS MAN KOHLEN IS BILLETED IN A HOUSE AT NEAR END OF VILLAGE.



RON WAS UP FRONT WITH GIANNI AND MARCO WHEN THE PARTISANS' LEADER GAVE THE WORD TO MOVE.



THEY CROSSED THE SKYLINE AND BEFORE LONG, THEY SAW A GROUP OF SENTRIES. RON WAVED THE PARTISANS BACK INTO COVER AS HE AND THEIR LEADER CROPT FORWARD.



The Silent Witness

DESPITE HIS BULK, GIANNI ALMOST REACHED THE SENTRIES BEFORE THEY SENSED THEIR DANGER. BY THEN, IT WAS TOO LATE!



THE TWO GERMANS WERE DROPPED IN THEIR TRACKS WITH THE MINIMUM OF DISTURBANCE. GIANNI TURNED TO MARCO...



SEVEN IN NUMBER, RON AND HIS COMPANIONS SLIPPED SILENTLY INTO THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE VILLAGE. THEY DARTED FROM COVER TO COVER BUT THE RISK OF DETECTION WAS GREAT NOW . . .

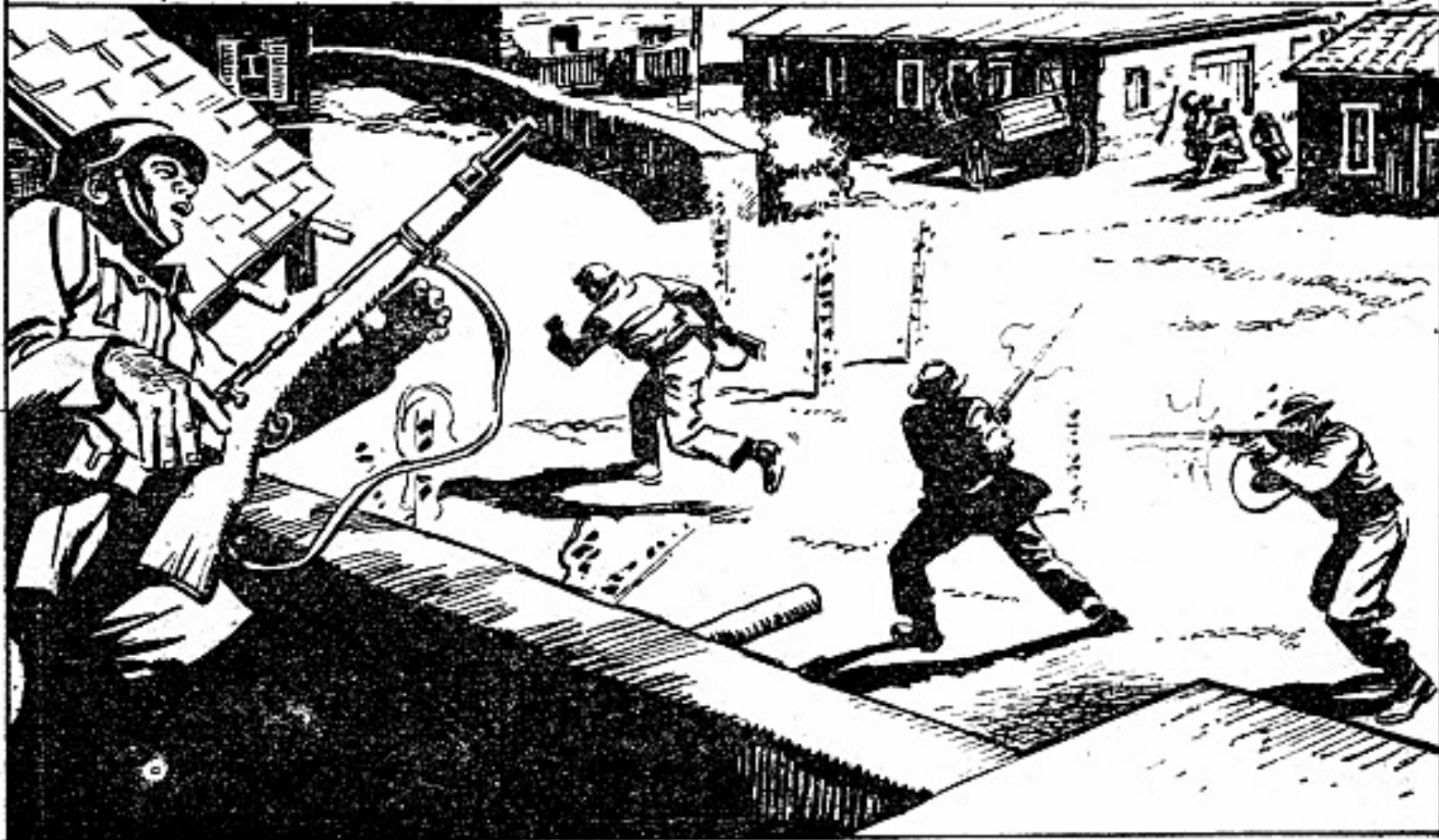


A NAZI MACHINE-PISTOL RIPPED OUT A VICIOUS BURST. A PARTISAN'S TOMMY GUN BACK-ANSWERED IN SWIFT STACCATO . . .



The Silent Witness

AS THE BRITISH SUBALTERN AND THE SIX PARTISANS RACED UP THE NARROW STREET, SHOTS WHIPPED AT THEM FROM RIGHT AND LEFT . . .



THERE WAS NOT A MOMENT TO SPARE NOW — THE ALARM HAD BEEN RAISED AND DEATH WAITED TO POUNCE ON ANY MAN WHO LINGERED .



THE DOOR OF THE HOUSE INDICATED BY MARCO WAS FLUNG OPEN. A STOCKY LEUTNANT APPEARED AND NEXT MOMENT, A SAVAGE BURST OF FIRE WHANGED PAST RON ...



THE YOUNG OFFICER'S TOMMY GUN CHATTERED BRIEFLY. THE LEUTNANT BUCKLED. NEXT MOMENT, RON WAS CRASHING INTO THE HOUSE ...



SNARLING LIKE A CORNERED ANIMAL, THE OBERLEUTNANT SWUNG THE SCHMEISSER TOWARDS RON. BUT BEFORE THE NAZI COULD FIRE, THE ENGLISHMAN FLUNG HIMSELF FORWARD . . .

NO, YOU DON'T,
YOU MURDERING
RAT!



DAZED BY THE BLOW, THE OBERLEUTNANT WAS DRAGGED OUTSIDE. RIFLES WERE CRACKING ALL OVER THE VILLAGE — ESCAPE WOULD NOT BE EASY.



SOME OF THE
SENTRIES HAVE GOT
BETWEEN US AND
YOUR FRIENDS,
GIANNI!

A LONG BURST FROM RON'S TOMMY-GUN CLEARED ONE GROUP OF THE ENEMY BLOCKING THEIR PATH.



NOW EVERY HOUSE IN ALTAMIGLIA WAS DISGORGING GERMANS. AS THEY MILLED CONFUSEDLY IN THE MAIN STREET, THE RESISTANCE MEN HUSTLED KOHLEN AWAY . . .



The Silent Witness

THAT GERMAN CAPTAIN AND HIS MEN DOUBLED FORWARD — AND RAN SMACK INTO TROUBLE . . .



KOHLER AND HIS CAPTORS CROSSED THE SKYLINE. GIANNI SPOKE BRISKLY, CHEERFULLY...

LIEUTENANT, NOW YOU AND MARCO TAKE THIS GERMAN TO OUR HIDEOUT, YES.

AND LEAVE YOU AND THE OTHERS HERE? NOT ON YOUR LIFE!



THERE WAS AN ARGUMENT. IT WAS SHORT-LIVED...

YOU DO LIKE I SAY! WE GIVE YOU A CHANCE TO MEK' GET-AWAY WITH NAZI PRISONER, THEN WE FADE INTO NIGHT. LATER, WE REJOIN YOU OKAY.



MARCO STARTED OFF WITH THE OBERLEUTNANT AND GIANNI PUSHED RON AFTER THEM INSISTENTLY. THE ENGLISHMAN LOOKED BACK HESITANTLY...


HANG IT! I FEEL AS IF I'M RUNNING OUT ON THEM...

DO NOT WORRY, SIGNORE. THEY TEK' CARE OF THEMSELVES GOOD.




GIANNI HAD ASSUMED COMMAND ON THE SKYLINE NOW. HIS VOICE EXHORTED HIS PARTISANS INTO VIOLENT DEFIANCE OF THE GERMANS.

KEEP SHOOTING,
COMRADES! DRIVE
THE DEVILS
BACK!



THE PARTISANS MAINTAINED THEIR FIRE TILL THEIR GUNS SWEATED OIL. BUT THEY WERE HEAVILY OUTNUMBERED AND SOON HEAVIER WEAPONS BEGAN TO RANGE ON THEIR THIN LINE OF DEFENCE.

AH! THEIR ACCURSED
MORTARS ARE IN ACTION,
FRIENDS! TIME FOR
US TO GO!



GIANNI AND HIS COMPANIONS SLIPPED AWAY INTO THE NIGHT. THEY WERE A LONG WAY OFF WHEN THE NAZIS FINALLY REALISED THEY HAD DISPERSED.

IN JUST OVER AN HOUR, RON AND MARCO WERE BACK AT THE HIDEOUT WITH THEIR CAPTIVE. THERE, RON TRIED TO RESIGN HIMSELF TO WAITING...

WHY AM I HERE, ENGLANDER? AM I TO BE KILLED IN COLD BLOOD?

THE WAY MY MEN WERE KILLED? NO, KOHLEN, ALL I WANT FROM YOU IS AN ADMISSION THAT WILL CLEAR ME. I AM ACCUSED OF THE MURDER OF MY OWN MEN BECAUSE OF YOUR FOUL TRICKERY.

RON TURNED TO MARCO. DESPITE THE SUCCESS OF HIS DARING FORAY, THE ENGLISH LIEUTENANT KNEW HE WOULD BE UNABLE TO SETTLE DOWN UNTIL GIANNI AND THE REST OF THE BAND RETURNED SAFELY.

MARCO, I'M GOING OUTSIDE TO WATCH FOR YOUR FRIENDS. KEEP AN EYE ON THE GERMAN, WILL YOU?

SI, SIGNORE.

The Silent Witness

RON STEPPED FROM THE CAVERN AND HOVERED ANXIOUSLY IN FRONT OF ITS ENTRANCE FOR A FEW MINUTES. THEN HE WANDERED DOWN THE HILLSIDE. THEN . . .



THERE CAME THE SOUNDS OF A SCUFFLE — THEN MUFFLED CRIES OF RAGE AND OF PAIN.



MARCO HAD BEEN CAUGHT OFF GUARD BY THE RASCALLY GERMAN.

WITH MARCO OUT TO THE WORLD, KOHLEN MADE A BOLT FOR IT — AND AT ONCE RON SHEPHERD WAS IN A DILEMMA!



HE STARTED OFF AFTER THE OBERLEUTNANT, BENT ON OVERTAKING HIM AND FORCING HIM TO SURRENDER AGAIN. BUT SOON KOHLEN REACHED A JUMBLE OF BOULDERS . . .



The Silent Witness

RON COULD NOT SAVE HIMSELF AT THE COST OF SO MANY LIVES. HE RAISED HIS TOMMY GUN AND TOOK CAREFUL AIM AT THE FLEEING GERMAN...

BY SHOOTING
KOHLEN, I AM
CONDEMNING MYSELF.
WHAT ELSE CAN
I DO?



THE CHANGE-LEVER WAS AT "AUTOMATIC". YET THE TOMMY-GUN RAPPED OUT A SINGLE SHOT. IT WAS RON SHEPHERD'S LAST...THE LAST ROUND FOR THE ONLY MAN WHO STOOD BETWEEN HIM AND INFAMY.

AAAGH!



KOHLER WAS DEAD WHEN RON REACHED THE SPOT WHERE HE HAD FALLEN. IN A MINUTE OR SO, THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT WAS JOINED BY MARCO . . .

MARCO, THERE'S SOMETHING I HAVE TO DO - AND THE SOONER I GET IT OVER WITH, THE BETTER. I WON'T WAIT FOR GIANNI AND THE OTHERS. GIVE THEM MY BEST WISHES WHEN THEY SHOW UP.



HE SET OFF IN A SOUTHERLY DIRECTION. ONCE MORE, HE MANAGED TO INFILTRATE BETWEEN STRONGPOINTS ON A DISCONTINUOUS FRONT. NEXT MORNING . . .

WHAT THE DEUCE?

HERE'S SHEPHERD AGAIN, SIR. APPARENTLY HE REALISED IT WAS FOOLISH OF HIM TO MAKE A BREAK FOR IT. SEEMS, HE'S DECIDED TO FACE THE MUSIC.



RON ATTEMPTED TO EXPLAIN . . .

BEVERLEY'S A BIT WIDE OF THE MARK, SIR. I HAVE A COMPLETE ANSWER TO THE CHARGE AGAINST ME BUT UNFORTUNATELY, I'VE NO WITNESSES

ON THE FACE OF IT, I DON'T THINK ANY DENIALS MADE BY YOU WILL CARRY MUCH WEIGHT, SHEPHERD, NOT NOW!

LIEUTENANT BEVERLEY, TAKE HIM OUT OF MY SIGHT, BUT DON'T LET HIM OUT OF YOURS. YOU'LL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR HIM . . .

JUST AFTER DUSK THAT DAY, RON WAS SUMMONED TO BATTALION H.Q.— WHERE A SURPRISE VISITOR AWAITED HIM . . .

GIANNI!
WHAT BRINGS
YOU HERE?

A STAFF CAPTAIN ANSWERED RON'S STARTLED QUESTION . . .

THIS IS WHAT BRINGS HIM HERE. IT'S A PAPER HE DELIVERED PERSONALLY TO DIVISIONAL H.Q. HE CAN'T READ GERMAN BUT THOUGHT THE DOCUMENT MIGHT BE IMPORTANT. IT IS — TO YOU.



AN AMBITIOUS, STOP-AT-NOTHING TYPE — THE OBERLEUTNANT. THIS IS A REPORT HE CARRIED IN HIS POCKET, DESCRIBING IN DETAIL HOW HE TRICKED YOUR MEN BY DRESSING UP A FELDWEBEL IN YOUR HELMET AND TUNIC.



RON BECAME AWARE OF HIS COMMANDING OFFICER'S VOICE. ITS TONE WAS APOLOGETIC . . .

SHEPHERD, I'M SORRY WE MISJUDGED YOU . . . DASHED SORRY! IF YOU'VE ANY FAVOUR YOU'D LIKE TO ASK, I'LL BE HAPPY TO GRANT IT, PROVIDED IT'S IN MY POWER TO DO SO.



THE YOUNG SUBALTERN WAS SILENT FOR A MOMENT. THEN . . .

I'LL TAKE YOU UP ON THAT, SIR. WOULD YOU PERSUADE THE M.O. TO PASS ME AS FIT AND LET ME CHUCK AWAY THIS SLING? I'D LIKE TO STAY WITH THE BATTALION.

CERTAINLY, MY BOY. I'LL TRY TO TALK THE DOC INTO IT, UNLESS HE CONVINCES ME HOSPITAL TREATMENT IS ESSENTIAL FOR YOU.



RON SHEPHERD LEFT THE ORDERLY ROOM SHORTLY AFTERWARDS, IN COMPANY WITH GIANNI. THOUGHTFULLY, THE COLONEL WATCHED HIM GO . . .

FIRST TIME UNDER FIRE FORTY-EIGHT HOURS AGO, AND HE MUST HAVE BEEN IN DEVILISH TORMENT EVER SINCE — THE WORST KIND OF MENTAL TORMENT. THAT BOY'S GOT WHAT IT TAKES — LIKE HIS FATHER BEFORE HIM. WE KNOW THAT NOW.



...AND RON SHEPHERD KNEW THAT WHATEVER HAPPENED, NOTHING COULD BE WORSE THAN THE ORDEAL OF HIS FIRST TWO DAYS IN ACTION.

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